

Pushing buttons: controversial topics in museums

In the past twenty years, dozens of exhibitions throughout the world have incited debate or sparked controversy. These have included exhibitions and displays about a vast range of topics: colonial expansion (The West as America at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art, First Encounters at the Florida Museum of Natural History, and representations of frontier conflict at the National Museum of Australia); race and race relations (Into the Heart of Africa at the Royal Ontario Museum, Another side of the Twentieth Century at the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Society, Indiana; The Shocking Show by Indianapolis artists; Faces of Sorrow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum); religion (Caution! Religion at the Sakharov Museum, Moscow); war and genocide (Making Differences at the Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm, and The Last Act or Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum); representations of the human body (Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment in the US, Body Art at the Australian Museum, and Gunther von Hagen's Body Worlds touring exhibition); and the relationships between science and industry (Darkened Waters: profile of an oil spill at the Pratt Museum in Homer, Alaska; Science and American Life at the National Museum of American History).

Over this period, a growing body of work has addressed the issue of controversial exhibitions (see for example the October 1984 issue of *Museum News*; Platt 1990; Bunch 1995; Noble 1995; Macdonald 1996; Crouch 1997; McConnell and Hess 1998; Boyd 1999; Dubin 1999; Cameron 2003; Casey 2003; Ellison 2003). However most commentators have deconstructed the controversies themselves rather than produce

tangible arguments about the roles of museums and the topics which with which they ought to engage. This paper will fill this breach via a sustained consideration of a range of contentious topics; it will explore why certain topics are considered controversial, and to whom, in a number of geographical locations. This discussion will be used to identify and make clear some of the underlying assumptions about the role of museums and the context in which they operate early in the 21st century.

In examining the issue of controversial topics, this paper reports on the findings of the *Contested Sites* research project. In so doing, it draws on a variety of perspectives: museum staff and stakeholders from across the world, the broader Australian community (people who both do and don't visit museums), as well as visitors to Australian and Canadian museums. To do this, the paper uses the results of focus groups, face-to-face interviews, community telephone surveys and an online survey (see Cameron, Kelly and Ferguson 2005 for further details). In the focus groups, participants were asked to identify any topics or issues that were particularly controversial or 'hot' in that country, or for that museum, at that time. This enabled the research to capture emerging controversies and contemporary responses. For the quantitative surveys, the research team developed a list of potential exhibition topics to gain an understanding of some of the subjects that might be considered controversial. Survey respondents were asked to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree whether these were topics that museums should have exhibitions about. There were 16 core topics that were included in each of the quantitative surveys: indigenous issues, immigration, population levels, asylum seekers, death, terrorism, treatment of prisoners of war, war atrocities, drugs, sex, religion, racism, social justice, globalisation, sustainability of the environment, and

genetic engineering. Additional topics were added to various surveys depending on the country in which it was being conducted and any issues that were current at the time of the research. In Australia, respondents were also asked about reconciliation with Aboriginal society, the Republic, former enemies of Australia, and cloning. In Canada, respondents were asked about cloning, residential schools, torture and genocide in Canadian history, French-Canadian nationalism, the hanging of Louis Riel, civilian casualties of war, women and war, East and West Coast fisheries, and health care. The online survey included evolution, abortion, contraception, and euthanasia.

So... which topics are considered controversial for museums to engage with, and why? To whom are topics controversial? What variation is there? More importantly, what does this tell us about the role of museums and the context in which they operate?

Desire and trepidation: Museum staff and stakeholders

It seems appropriate to begin by considering the issue of controversial exhibition topics from the perspective of museum staff and stakeholders. What are their attitudes towards the holding of exhibitions about controversial topics or themes? Which topics do they think could be controversial? The *Contested Sites* research project examined this issue by holding focus groups with museum staff and stakeholders in five countries: the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. Staff and stakeholders from museums across these locations could readily identify topics that would be considered contentious within their own museums. These differed from institution to institution and from country to country, however several broad trends emerged.

In the USA, museum staff identified six topics as being potentially (or actually) controversial. These included scientific topics that confront people's ethics or beliefs (such as evolution, animal rights, and biotechnology); issues of national identity as it relates to ethnicity or race relations; the idea of an unpatriotic national identity – in other words, 'any topic that presumes to criticise America for anything' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#d); issues that are perceived to be about morality (such as abortion rights, sexual identity, and drugs); different perspectives of history (including indigenous histories and women's histories); and finally, terrorism and the war against Iraq, together with related subjects such as Islam. These topics reflect an uneasy tension between the rights of the individual, allegiance to the authority of the state and the church, and America's relationship with other nations or peoples in terms of current world events and politics.

Five main themes emerged amongst Canadian staff and stakeholders. Many of these were similar to topics that had arisen in the USA, although the emphases were somewhat different. For Canadians, controversial topics included expressions of national identity, particularly as it relates to ethnicity, race relations, and to a lesser extent regionalism; military conflict, including both contemporary and historical events; exhibitions about other cultures, especially where these intersect with current events (such as Middle Eastern cultures); topics related to civil disorder or community decline such as violence, sex, or vandalism; and scientific topics that challenge people's ethics or beliefs (including evolution as in the USA, but also the killing of animals).

In the United Kingdom, staff identified many topics as being potentially controversial for museums to tackle. Several topics were similar to those identified in

Canada. Foremost was the notion of communities in decline – this covered a gamut of issues including domestic violence, crime, gangs, drugs, and the split between rural and urban communities. Military conflict was another key topic; this included the war against Iraq as well as having to deal with the legacy of older wars. Other potentially controversial topics included multiculturalism and racism; difficult or unsavoury aspects of British history (such as slavery, and the situation in Northern Ireland); scientific developments, including genetically modified food; the provision of government services such as education, health, and transport; issues relating to gender and sexuality, including sexism and the sexualisation of children; and environmental issues.

Three main topics were identified by staff and stakeholders in New Zealand museums. These included sex or sexuality, namely practices like S&M or genital mutilation; indigenous issues such as sovereignty and the mythologising of Maori people and practices; and graphic representations of the human body (showing deformities, maimed or dead people, or pornography).

Staff working in Australian museums identified a wide range of topics as being potentially controversial for museums to tackle. These included the questioning of Australian involvement in military conflicts such as the war in Iraq and even the Vietnam War; issues relating to sexuality, including brutalisation, paedophilia, and the sexualisation of children; political activism; the difficult joint histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (such as frontier conflict and the Stolen Generation); environmental issues and activism; graphic representations of the human body; and drugs and drug use.

The identification of such a long list of potentially controversial topics does not

suggest that museums are failing to engage with these issues altogether. Indeed, staff gave a number of examples where museums had presented exhibitions about these topics – sometimes without raising a murmur, at other times provoking considerable backlash. However, staff and stakeholders are very mindful that they are in the front-line of museums – when controversy strikes, they bear its brunt. Many staff are deeply concerned about how certain topics could be displayed in museums, and they fear the possible outcomes of hosting controversial exhibitions.

One of the foremost fears expressed by staff was that of losing funding support. As one staff member said, ‘the museum is very much hobbled by its funding sources’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#c). Others spoke about the need to act pragmatically, acknowledging that sometimes decisions on what to exhibit were based on ‘being able to financially sustain ourselves’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#h). Some staff members spoke from the experience of having had funding cut in the past: ‘Our retribution tends to be financial so because we’re not government funded, if you piss on the wrong people you lose your money and that’s where the self-censorship [comes in]’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#k). This fear was not just associated with privately-funded museums, however, as a number of publicly-funded museums also raised the spectre of self-censorship to avoid the threat of funding losses. For example, one museum was located in a province with a government that had an aggressive forestry policy; staff claimed that the museum could not possibly do an exhibition about forestry practices ‘because we get so much money from the province’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#c). Furthermore, some Canadian museum staff claimed that it was unlawful for civil servants to oppose

government policy, making it impossible for them to fully explore all of the pertinent issues in some exhibitions; doing so not only risked the loss of funding to the museum, but the dismissal of staff: 'You have to... be prepared to resign or be fired, because it can happen' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#d). Writing ten years ago, Noble (1995: 76) suggested that there was a 'real danger' that museums would engage in self-censorship to avoid controversy; indeed, Bunch (1995: 34) suggested that the 'greatest danger' faced by museums was their willingness to self-censor. The findings of the *Contested Sites* research project suggest that this danger is still very real today.

Apart from the risk of self-censorship to ensure that exhibitions were palatable to funders, an associated concern was that the content of exhibitions would be unduly influenced by corporate or political sponsors. It was feared that this could occur in two main ways – either as an overt influence on exhibition content, or via heightened political correctness in exhibition messages.

Another fear expressed by staff is the potential impact that controversial displays could have on visitors – a fear that such exhibitions would bring 'hate into the museum' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#a). In one museum, staff worried that showing a range of views on a topic would allow extremist views to be portrayed; this 'would create hatred and that's the last thing that we want to do' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). A related fear was that the museum could be hijacked as a platform for the opinions of various lobby groups. Others feared that graphic images such as photographs of people who had been lynched would encourage unsavoury people to visit, those 'who actually enjoy just feasting off horror' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript NZ#b). As a result of all of these fears, museum staff

admitted that there were some topics ‘that don’t even get talked about, that are off the agenda completely’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#f).

Despite the concerns expressed by staff and stakeholders, the *Contested Sites* project also found that some people were frustrated at their own museum’s reticence at engaging with controversial topics. A number of staff voiced a personal desire for their museum to tackle difficult or potentially controversial topics. One focus group participant was even more enthusiastic, calling for ‘A museum of controversy, one that’s not funded by anybody’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript CAN#d). In the online staff survey, a majority of respondents agreed that each suggested topic was one that museums should hold exhibitions about – even those topics that were mentioned in the focus groups as being ‘hot’. Indeed, in this survey a large majority of respondents (89%) agreed that museums *should* present exhibitions about topics that may be seen as taboo or controversial (Contested Sites Website Survey). This result clearly shows that museum professionals see a role for museums to engage with difficult and potentially controversial topics. However, there is uncertainty as to what this role could be, and staff face this prospect with a mix of both desire and trepidation.

A great chasm? Community perceptions

It has been claimed that a ‘great chasm’ exists between what museum professionals perceive as their roles and the views of the general public (Bunch 1995: 35). The next section of this paper questions whether this is in fact true by examining the perspectives of the broader Australian community in relation to potentially controversial exhibition topics. It examines those topics that the broader community considers appropriate for

museums to hold exhibitions about, as well as those that are considered inappropriate. It will also discuss some of the concerns raised by members of the public related to the role of museums in society, particularly those related to the holding of controversial exhibitions. This section draws on the results of two omnibus telephone surveys held for the *Contested Sites* study. The first of these interviewed adults living in Sydney, the largest city in Australia; the second interviewed adults living in Canberra, the capital of Australia (Contested Sites Community Survey, Sydney; Contested Sites Community Survey, Canberra).

When asked their opinion about the list of potentially controversial exhibition topics, respondents mostly agreed that these were ones that museums *should* hold exhibitions about. In both cities, large majorities supported the right of museums to host exhibitions about topics such as sustainability of the environment, immigration, reconciliation with Aboriginal society, population levels, and social justice. In Canberra, a large majority also agreed with the hosting of exhibitions about war atrocities and the treatment of prisoners of war. For each of these topics, more than seven out of ten respondents agreed that museums should present exhibitions about them.

There were some topics, however, that elicited a degree of doubt or condemnation. For example, Sydney audiences were most doubtful about museums displaying the topics of terrorism (with only 48% agreeing or strongly agreeing that this topic should be exhibited), asylum seekers (50%), and death (51%). In Canberra, terrorism and asylum seekers were also considered to be dubious topics for display (with only 54% agreeing that these topics should be exhibited), as were genetic engineering (56%), and cloning (48%). Even with these topics, however, more people agreed than disagreed that they

should be exhibited within museums.

When asked whether museums should present exhibitions about topics that some people may see as taboo or controversial, around sixty per cent of respondents agreed (62% in Sydney, 59% in Canberra). The level of support in the general community is smaller than it is amongst museum professionals (where almost 90% agreed). However, there is still majority support. Only about two in ten disagreed with this proposition, with the rest neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or unsure of their position.

This result suggests an openness by the broader community regarding what museums should display and the roles that museums can embrace in society. Indeed, many respondents commented on how important it was for museums to make people aware of current issues and enable them to access in-depth, accurate information about such topics and issues. This would allow individuals and society as a whole to become informed and to shape or perhaps change their opinions about important topics and issues. Others spoke about how people could freely choose to visit a museum or not: 'If people don't want to see controversial exhibitions, don't go!' (Contested Sites Community Survey, Sydney).

Of those people who oppose museums holding controversial exhibitions, five main concerns emerged. Firstly, a number of people were concerned that the holding of such exhibitions was not the primary role of museums: they exist to preserve and showcase items of history, art, and general knowledge. A second concern was that controversial displays could offend or disturb visitors, particularly children and others that are easily influenced. There was a moral undertone to some of this commentary: that museums have a moral responsibility not to affect visitors in this way. Building from this, a number of

people said that museums were not places for fighting or controversy; the hosting of such exhibitions could provoke trouble amongst visitors who had opposing views about the topic at hand. A fourth concern expressed the view that museums should present facts, not opinions or debateable topics. Finally, a small number of people commented that museums should not become involved in politics – that in their opinion, this was beyond the scope of museums. Some of these concerns reflect those expressed by museum staff and stakeholders, particularly the potential negative affect that museums could have on visitors.

Indeed, rather than there being ‘a great chasm’ between the views of the general public and those of museum professionals, the *Contested Sites* project has found that the broader community supports the right of museums to hold exhibitions about topics that might be considered controversial.

A museum divided: Visitor perceptions

As members of the community who choose to interact with museums, the views of visitors cannot be discounted. For the *Contested Sites* project, museum visitors at three Canadian and two Australian museums were surveyed, to determine their views on potentially controversial exhibition topics and whether museums should host exhibitions of them. Focus groups were held with Australian museum visitors, to investigate this topic in depth.

A majority of visitors at each of the five museums – at least 70% of respondents – agreed that museums should hold exhibitions about topics that may be considered taboo or controversial by some people (results drawn from Contested Sites Exit Survey,

Canadian War Museum; Contested Sites Exit Survey, Musée d'Art; Contested Sites Exit Survey, Museum of Anthropology). On the whole, museum visitors also mostly agreed that the proposed topics were ones museums *should* have exhibitions about. In Canada, a majority of surveyed visitors at each of the three museums involved in the research agreed that the proposed topics should be displayed in museums. However, three topics proved borderline. These were sex (with only 51% of Canadian War Museum visitors agreeing or strongly agreeing that this topic was suitable for museum exhibitions); residential schools for indigenous peoples (52% Musée d'Art Montreal, 58% Canadian War Museum); and French-Canadian nationalism (52% Musée d'Art Montreal). In Australia, there were six topics that evoked either a negative or borderline response; several of these had provoked a similar reaction amongst the broader community. These topics were terrorism (only 41% of visitors to the Australian Museum agreed or strongly agreed that this topic was suitable for an exhibition); cloning (47% Australian War Memorial); asylum seekers (50% Australian War Memorial, 53% Australian Museum); the Republic (46% Australian Museum, 53% Australian War Memorial); sex (54% Australian War Memorial, 58% Australian Museum); and genetic engineering (54% Australian War Memorial) (results drawn from Contested Sites Exit Survey, Australian Museum; Contested Sites Exit Survey, Australian War Memorial). As with the community perspectives survey though, more people agreed than disagreed that these topics should be displayed in museums, although an outright majority was not always achieved.

In focus groups with museum visitors, some of these topics triggered heated discussion and could definitely be considered 'hot' for Australian audiences. Whilst

several of the topics that caused sparks in the focus groups had previously been identified in the quantitative research, new topics emerged. Those that elicited the strongest debate are discussed below, along with the reasons why some visitors believe these topics are inappropriate, and their concerns not just for the visiting public but for the future of museums.

Terrorism

The topic of terrorism was clearly divisive and elicited strong views from people in the focus groups. Participants gave a number of reasons why terrorism was not an appropriate topic for museums to hold exhibitions about. Firstly, it was seen as depressing and emotional: 'I was worried about an exhibition on terrorism because I thought it would just be a downer and I like exhibitions to be uplifting' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). For others, this topic was seen as simply 'too emotive of a subject to put out in a museum at this time' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Following from this, visitors believed that an exhibition on terrorism would be upsetting for children: 'I don't think they need to know about that at the moment' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). Terrorism was not necessarily seen as an historical subject, as the situation was still occurring: 'Like that terrorist thing, maybe not, because it's ongoing' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). This meant that information was still secret or classified, which in turn meant that museums couldn't possibly present all of the facts: 'We've got some knowledge but...you could not present the facts on terrorism because of Intelligence' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Some people couldn't

conceptualise how a museum could display this topic, asking, ‘How would you present – in a museum – terrorism? I don’t quite understand that’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Visitors also expressed their fears that presenting this topic could legitimise terrorism, stating that such an exhibition would give ‘legitimacy to something that has no legitimacy’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). Others claimed that ‘It could actually lead to more fear’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b), or worried that it would incite hatred or violence:

If they were honest about terrorism, “We hate Westerners, we hate Christians, we want to kill them”, [then] we’re going to go out and beat up the first Muslim we see (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

This would ultimately detract from the role of museums:

Exhibitions on asylum seekers or terrorism or things like that, that was presented in a way that was controversial, you start having factions developing around what they think of this, that and the other thing. That would possibly get away from the role of a museum as a place to go and study or observe what’s been (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

On the positive side, however, people who thought museums should be engaging with this topic said that museums could build up historical understanding around the subject by putting current events into perspective, showing visitors ‘where it’s come from and how it’s escalated... [and] what we’re likely to see in the future’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Museums could also inform and educate people, teach them to ‘have greater respect for other cultures and other nations’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b), and help people understand why humans resort to terrorism: ‘What is it about terrorism, why that mode of human behaviour, why do people act in that way?’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Asylum seekers

The topic of asylum seekers was another that elicited strong views in the focus groups, mostly from older people. Many of those who disagreed that museums should address this topic said that it was too political: ‘It’s one that’s too political at the moment. Too emotional. Too emotionally charged’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Some believed that the museum could be ‘hijacked’, expressing concern that ‘you might have people out the front protesting about the people at Woomera or they might use that as a forum to push their political angle’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Others said that museum staff themselves would present a biased view:

I guarantee that you would get a section which says “Immigrants are terrific and asylum seekers are wonderful”, [and you wouldn’t get] “John Howard’s objections to asylum seekers are extremely sound” (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

This seems to reflect a perception, identified by Bunch (1995), that museums ‘are dominated by loony, left-wingers’ (35), incapable of presenting a balanced viewpoint.

Another view expressed by focus group participants was that the issue of asylum seekers was not yet settled: ‘Many people have many differing opinions and views about [it] – it seems inappropriate to put it in a museum’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). As with terrorism, people couldn’t conceptualise how a museum could display this topic, asking, ‘How would you – going back to the items of clothing and the stuff they used and whatever it is – how would you represent that with asylum seekers?’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Also, there were fears that it would incite aggression – ‘You could imagine the arguments going on

outside the exhibition, couldn't you?' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e)'.

However, those who thought museums should look at this topic spoke about the power of hearing people's stories: 'The asylum seekers exhibition would be good too because... again, it's human stories which are powerful' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). By providing information about such topics, museums could also break down stereotypes within society:

I think it would be quite good with issues like that where there's a lot of stereotypes and stuff – if you know there are certain issues where people have strong views without maybe knowing that much (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

Religion

Religion was another 'hot' topic amongst museum visitors who attended the focus groups, even though it had not been identified as such in the quantitative research. People who disagreed that museums should address this topic gave reasons such as that it would incite emotions or violence amongst different groups of people: 'As soon as you start talking about religion, there's another war starting' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Nor could people conceptualise how a museum could display this topic in a way that would capture and hold their interest. Participants asked questions such as, 'With religion, I kind of think what are they going to show which is going to be captivating? And provide an interesting experience?' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Others were dubious about museums' capabilities to address this topic due to its breadth: 'I think any exhibition of religion would have to be a particular religion – it's just too big isn't it – to have an exhibition on?' (Contested Sites

Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Furthermore, there were concerns that an exhibition on religion could be biased or indoctrinating: 'It couldn't be an indoctrination and it couldn't be advocating one religion' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

On the positive side, however, some people said that museums should address this topic as it was relevant to everyone, even those who weren't religious themselves:

It's shaped all our lives in one way or another. The reason we couldn't have Sunday trading was because of religion – the only reason. So it's shaped our lives quite a bit (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

An exhibition on religion could also broaden people's perspectives:

If you were a Catholic many years ago, anyone not a Catholic was going to hell... I think you could broaden people's views... to stop the mysticism of other religions (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

Racism

Racism was another topic that elicited strong views from visitors. Many of the reasons people gave for not addressing this topic were similar to those already raised. These include the fact that it's not historical: 'It's a current affair, not a museum thing'

(Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c), and that it was not necessary for museums to show this topic (perhaps because it would reflect badly on society):

'Racism, that sort of stuff doesn't need to be shown' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Others suggested that an exhibition on racism could be prejudiced, stating that 'It would be really hard to be an unbiased exhibition' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Again, too, people expressed qualms that it could incite violence, even if this just highlighted their own racist tendencies: 'If we

talked about Islam honestly, everyone would go and beat Muslims up because they hate us' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Those who supported museums addressing the issue of racism spoke of museums' capacity to build up historical understanding around the subject:

Museums can show us what happened caused by racism in the past and then we can see that it's the wrong thing for it to happen today (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

Museums could also inform and educate people, challenge their own thinking, and help them realise when they *were* being racist:

A lot of people don't realise they're being racist... Museums could present lots of different views that call into question people's views (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Sex and drugs

Two other topics – sex and drugs – were also considered contentious for inclusion in museum exhibitions, although to a lesser extent than the topics previously discussed.

When considering the topics of sex and drugs, people suggested that they were too extensive for an exhibition, and that they were beyond the expertise of museum professionals:

Drugs are covered in other areas by specialist people and if museums tried to do it, I don't think that they could do anywhere near justice to what they need to do (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

Others claimed that it was not necessary, or appropriate, for museums to show such topics:

In an ordinary museum, you don't go there to look at things about drugs and sex... I don't see the need for exhibits on sex and drugs really (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d).

There were also concerns that museums would create a disturbance – ‘I think they're really stirring things up with that’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e) – or that exhibitions on these topics could legitimise certain behaviours:

We say we want museums to be non-judgmental, but do you really want museums to say, “This is what the drug is, this is how it’s derived, this is the sort of pharmacological experience that you can expect – it could make you hallucinate, which could be pleasant or unpleasant...” Do we feel comfortable about providing that sort of information? I don’t know (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

Those people who agreed that museums should look at these topics recognised that there was a need for education in these areas, as ‘People aren’t educated on these today’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b).

The comments above clearly show strong differences of opinion held by museum visitors about what is and isn’t appropriate for museums to exhibit. Is it possible to categorise visitors based on their reactions to these topics? The findings of the *Contested Sites* research certainly suggest so. As part of the research, a cluster analysis was performed on visitors to the Australian War Memorial and the Australian Museum to determine whether different types of visitors could be identified. Cluster analysis detects relatively homogenous groups from the data – for example, respondents who answer the questions in similar ways or share similar demographic profiles. The *Contested Sites* clusters were based on the complete suite of questions asked of visitors in the survey, that is, the statements about the roles of museums, the potential exhibition topics, and various demographic variables. At the Australian War Memorial, two clusters were identified. These two clusters generally saw the role of museums in the same way, with similar proportions of people in each cluster agreeing and disagreeing with the statements about the roles of museums. A majority of people in each cluster agreed that museums should

hold exhibitions about topics that could be seen as taboo or controversial. However, when pressed on which topics were appropriate for museums to display, stark differences emerged. In one cluster, there was very high support for the proposed exhibition topics (for example, 94% supported exhibitions on asylum seekers, 92% did so for cloning, and 96% for genetic engineering). In the other cluster, however, relatively few people supported exhibitions about these topics (24% for asylum seekers, 22% for cloning, and 31% for genetic engineering) (Contested Sites Exit Survey, Australian War Memorial). These differences between the clusters were statistically significant. Similar findings transpired at the Australian Museum where three clusters of visitors were identified: one that agreed that the topics should be displayed, one that disagreed, and one that neither agreed nor disagreed. At both museums, it was the *topics* that differentiated between one cluster and the next, rather than the *statements* about the roles of museums. Even though many visitors *say* that museums should hold exhibitions about potentially controversial topics, for a large number of visitors, the evidence suggests otherwise. Indeed the proof is in the particulars – the specific topics that they *don't* believe should be exhibited. This finding suggests that controversial topics and exhibitions will continue to bring museums to flashpoint in the future, even museums that have broad audience support for the concept of hosting potentially controversial displays.

Through the looking glass...

The topics, and the reasons why museum staff, visitors, and the wider community think they should or should not be displayed, reveal much about people's perceptions of museums. Indeed, they bring to light a number of fundamental understandings of the

roles of museums in society today. These understandings are so primary that they underscore the range of potential roles that were tested in the *Contested Sites* research project (see Kelly 2005, Cameron 2005). In discussing them here, I uncover some of the multifarious challenges faced by museums in meeting the conflicting needs of different constituents, and raise broader concerns about the ability of museums to meet these challenges. I also consider some potential roles that museums may wish to embrace in the future.

Historical

Firstly, the research reveals that people generally perceive museums to be about history: 'Presenting history or something to you in a visual form' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e) or in the words of another visitor, 'When it is history, that's the time museums should take over' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c).

But what do people understand of the word 'history', of the nature of history, and of historical research? A number of commentators have previously discussed these questions and drawn attention to misconceptions held by the public about history and historical scholarship. Appleby (1999) asserts that people do not understand how historical scholarship is done, by whom, nor how our knowledge of the past changes. She claims that many believe that there are immutable, historical 'facts' which are not open to interpretation. She also notes that people are nostalgic about what they learned about the past, and find comfort and stability in this knowledge. They fear 'revisionist' history in a way they do not fear new knowledge in biology or chemistry. Cameron (2003) implicitly

acknowledges this belief that history is immutable when she suggests that museums need to draw attention to the fact that history is a changing body of knowledge, full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

The *Contested Sites* research upholds these claims. Many participants expressed the view that ‘history’ was determined and settled, unlike contemporary issues which are not yet resolved. As such, museums were seen as inappropriate venues to examine contemporary issues: ‘Many people have many differing opinions and views... it seems inappropriate to put it in a museum’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). ‘History’ also refers to the past; some contemporary subjects, such as cloning or genetic engineering, are seen as inappropriate for museums to deal with because they don’t have ‘history’. Indeed, visitors asked, ‘How could you put a display on cloning and GE? They’re so modern – there’s no history’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). However, museums are seen as having a legitimate role providing historical perspectives about current topics; indeed, just because an issue is current doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have a history:

Quite often what was out a couple of years ago has been forgotten or overlooked or meshed into something. By bringing it all together you remind people of what the original issues were, what the original debates were and why it has progressed in such a way (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#f).

The question of what is ‘historical’ and what is not, however, is somewhat vexed. In discussing with focus group participants when something would become ‘historical’, one person suggested, ‘Maybe five years is enough or less’ while someone else proposed, ‘Give us a nice, fifty, sixty year gap’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#c). The research also reminds us that history can be much more recent than that. For example, a curator at the New York Historical Society spoke about how on 11

September 2001, visitors came inside to watch a live broadcast of the day's events on a television in one of their exhibitions. The curator commented that 'This represented a safe place, and secondly, really they needed to register that it had happened, and by having it in a historical society, there was that overlay of, it is history, it has happened' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#g). This raises the question, should museums take a greater role in documenting and recording history, not just in presenting it afterwards? Some museums, such as the Newseum – feted for holding an exhibition about the 11 September attacks on 12 September – and the Australian War Memorial with its official war photographer and official war artist programs are moving into this arena.

One of the difficulties in discussing contemporary issues is that they can be very emotional. For some issues, emotions may be unresolved or unarticulated (Bunch 1995). Visitors worry that this emotion could get in the way of museums' ability to deal with issues in an unbiased way, stop them from being able to 'present all the facts' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Indeed, it has been suggested that museums must remove the emotion from a topic in order to engage rational thinking and present factual, empirically-based information (Cameron 2003). The other possibility, voiced by some focus group participants, is that visitors might themselves respond emotionally to displays, becoming upset or even arguing with other visitors.

Eventually, with time, contemporary issues become historical ones. Because they are no longer current, there are fewer emotions involved and they are therefore generally considered easier for museums to address. The flip side of the coin, however, is that this means they are also less relevant to visitors: as one person said, 'If it's a historical display

it's not overly relevant' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). If museums wait for issues to become 'historical', do they run the risk of becoming irrelevant? Would an *Enola Gay* exhibition still be contested in 2045?

Another related issue is a feeling from some people that there are aspects of history that should not be examined at all. For example, in talking about a potential exhibition on former enemies, one visitor said, 'The past is past, let's move on' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). But if museums are not the place to talk about the past, then where is?

To a certain extent, the *Contested Sites* research noted a tension between people wanting the truth about history, and people wanting 'uplifting' histories. This tension has been identified before – for example, Zolberg (1996) acknowledged a growing desire by some audiences 'to know what *really* happened' rather than to see the 'official' versions of history (Zolberg 1996: 79). Cameron (2003: 27) suggests that this tension is felt most keenly in national museums as they are 'encumbered with nationalistic expectations'.

This has been witnessed in the debate surrounding the opening of the National Museum of Australia and is reflected in this dialogue from a national American museum:

There's this larger sort of thing – should American history generally – whatever the subject – tell a story that is positive?'

'Especially the national museum which is a federal, official sort of place – isn't that where you'd most expect to see that positive?'

'We can tell the negative parts as long as we show that they are evolving and moving forward. We can't leave it at the negative (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#d).

How can these tensions be played out, particularly in national museums? As the director of a national museum asked, 'What is the proper role of a national museum?' (Casey 2003: 4).

It is also interesting to note that museums are mostly seen as places to learn *about*

the past rather than places to learn *from* the past. In fact, only one person in one focus group (out of dozens) actually spoke about museums as places that could help people learn from the past:

Well you can't really censor history so if there's something in there that is gruesome and it's the only way that it can be shown then it shouldn't be excluded just because of that. Because people will still be interested in knowing what it was all about and why it happened *and you learn from that so it doesn't happen again* (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#d).

This suggests that a more purposeful and strategic repositioning of museums is possible.

Rather than focusing on museums as a place to learn *about* the past, museums can promote themselves as places to learn *from* the past. Clearly, museums such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Imperial War Museum, Australian War Memorial, and South Africa's Apartheid Museum are in the business of helping visitors to reflect on the past so as not to repeat its mistakes. There is scope however for other museums to position themselves in this way too. This would open the way for visitors to expect and prepare for a more critical examination of past events and issues when they visit a museum, rather than a simple re-telling of what has occurred.

About identity

Closely linked to questions of history are those of identity. The findings remind us that museums are powerful symbols and signifiers of identity: 'We as an institution represent identity' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript NZ#a). This has long been recognised within the museum community. Almost 15 years ago, Karp (1991) wrote that 'Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication... exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are

not' (Karp 1991: 15). Macdonald (1996) claims that the notion of museums as 'projections of identity' (Macdonald 1996: 9) gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, as museums were challenged by or on behalf of previously-ignored or marginalised minority groups to have their stories told. Indeed, the most well-known museum controversy – the *Enola Gay* fiasco – can be understood as a perceived threat to the veterans' self-worth and identity (Cameron 2003). Similarly, the display at the centre of the American flag controversy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago was seen as an attack on the patriotic sensibilities and identity of visitors (Zolberg 1996).

The findings of the *Contested Sites* research suggest that at this historical point in time people's sense of identity is under threat. We are living in a complex global environment. Nations around the world are dealing with issues such as terrorism, war, immigration, asylum seekers, racism, and race relationships. Is it any wonder that people are 'going through a bit of an identity crisis' as one museum worker said of their experience in the UK (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript UK#b). Perhaps because of this crisis of identity, there is even more pressure for museums to present a definitive picture, a unified vision of national identity – 'the' national identity. This pressure can be applied overtly or obliquely, as the following example suggests.

During one focus group for the *Contested Sites* research project, one staff member described his experience in developing a concept for a new exhibition:

One of the earlier versions [of the exhibition concept] was called "American Identity" and there were so many times that the fund raisers and the council would say "*The* American Identity". When we used the term "American Identity" we meant complex and contested and all that. They just put article "The" in front of it and it suddenly became a totally different [exhibition] (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#d).

Again, this pressure is perhaps felt most keenly at national museums. There have been calls for the National Museum of Australia to engender 'a sense of pride and

patriotism' in visitors (Cameron 2003: 12), while in the United States it has been suggested that American history should be presented in such a way as to bind together disparate groups and achieve 'patriotic goals' (Appleby 1999: 8). Despite these pressures, few museum professionals would argue that it is possible to present a unified and singular version of *the* American, or *the* Australian, or *the* Canadian identity. Even if it were, would we want to? Is such 'nation-building' a role of museums? If so, could this be achieved by presenting a collective identity – 'the sum of us' (Casey 2003: 5) – rather than a singular version?

Collection based

The findings also affirm that people perceive museums to be about objects. Visitors have assumptions that museums are collection-based institutions, that their expertise resides in their knowledge of their collections, and that they present exhibitions using objects from their collections. For a number of the issues-based topics that were discussed, most people struggled to understand how these could possibly be represented in museums. What objects did museums have, or could get, that would allow these topics to be presented in museums? Do current collecting practices enable museums to engage with controversial or contemporary topics? As one visitor bemoaned, 'But how do you – on a museum basis – display or present terrorism? I don't understand' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e). Interestingly, this is not the case with the topic sustainability of the environment where people could readily talk about the issues that would be discussed, without having to worry about the objects that might be involved or how these issues might be presented in a display:

How could you put a display on the sustainability of the environment? What would you display?

An exhibition on the waterways, farming.

Salinity.

Chopping down rainforests.

Water levels (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#e).

This may be because the environmental movement has an established history now, and people have already seen museums tackle this topic. Perhaps it also represents visitors becoming more able to accept that ‘the museum is a place for both objects and ideas’ (Weil 1988: 50). Regardless, it highlights the fact that museums ought to examine their collection policies and practices, and possibly begin an active acquisition program, to ensure that they are positioned to build future exhibitions about topics that are ‘hot’ today.

Situational context

The findings also remind us that a visit to a museum takes place within a certain social and situational context; it involves a person or group of people walking through a space and engaging with displays and with other people. Visitors and staff alike recognise that this type of experience makes a museum exhibition an appropriate vehicle for some topics, but not for others:

There are some topics which aren’t appropriate for museums, not because they’re unimportant but because museums [are] not the best place to look at them (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#f).

Where there is an absence of collection items, museums may not be able to put together a compelling display. Also, exhibitions are not an effective medium for presenting detailed information and are better suited to providing an overview (Crouch 1997). In determining whether and how to deal with contentious issues, museum designers must take these

constraints into account.

Certainty

Museums provide certainty. They present factual information, things that we as a society know. Visitors describe how ‘The museum has always been factual – you can rely on it’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a) and that ‘You can only presume that when you go to an exhibition you’re seeing fact or history’ (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#b). Indeed, as one ex-director stated, ‘They look upon us as if we are the Encyclopaedia Britannica’ (Contested Sites Interview Transcript USA#b). Visitors value this certainty. When museums start to delve into some issues, visitors and staff alike become concerned that museums may undermine people’s certainties about themselves and the world:

[People go to museums] to get some reference about where they are in the scheme of things...where is my place in all this? [I have] some concerns you may come out of it with even less idea than you had before you went in (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a).

This has not always been the case, however. Boyd (1999) asserts that ‘In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, museums were at the forefront of challenging our accepted ideas about the world’ (Boyd 1999: 185). Museums were key places in which new theories such as evolution were presented via displays of natural history specimens. Bennett (1995) argues that the existence of museums allowed for the emergence of new sets of knowledge including geology, biology, anthropology, archaeology, and art history. These provided new ways of seeing and understanding the world. Museums used their collections and exhibitions as physical proof of the knowledge they presented, in the process establishing their infallible intellectual

authority. However, in so doing, museums gradually changed from being places that challenged ideas to places that endorsed and legitimised them. It can be argued that via their exhibitions, museums privileged the *products* of scholarly research and scientific enquiry – new knowledge – rather than the *process* of conducting such research. That is, museums' legitimising authority came from the facts they espoused, rather than the scholarly process used to create this knowledge.

In a world that values certainty, are museums prepared or able to be destabilising institutions? What role is there for museums to create exhibitions that undermine society's certainties about the world? How can museums manage the tensions of presenting certainty on one hand and ambiguity on the other? Cameron's (2005) call for museums to share their authority with audiences could be one way. Cameron suggests that museums reframe themselves as facilitators and informants rather than all-knowing experts; raise questions in exhibitions; present a range of scholarly views and sources; and assist and empower audiences to interpret what is presented so that they can reach their own conclusions. As part of this course of action, museums could emphasise the scholarly processes used to create new knowledge: how and why they believe certain things to be true. Such a step need not be destabilising, and could in fact add to museums' credibility.

Morality

Finally, the results show us that people want museums to be non-judgmental, to show both sides of the story. However, as previously discussed, there are topics that some people simply *don't* want museums to discuss. If a museum provided a non-judgmental,

balanced discussion about drugs this may appear to advocate drug use, and for some constituents this is not considered appropriate for museums to do.

Why is this?

The author believes this is because museums continue to operate in our society as a moral technology – that is, as a mechanism to produce ‘good citizens’ and a means by which the values of ‘civilised society’ are spread. Writing more than 15 years ago, Stephen Weil remarked that:

The notion of the museum as a disseminator of values is a complex one. In the mix of what museums provide to the public, this has long been one of their most significant, and at the same time most controversial roles (Weil 1988: 51).

However, 100 years before him, Thomas Greenwood wrote that:

A Museum and Free Library are as necessary for the mental and moral health of the citizens as good sanitary arrangements, water supply and street lighting are for their physical health and comfort (Greenwood quoted in Bennett 1995: 18).

Another 80 years before that, Colquhoun stated that:

Public Exhibitions should be rendered subservient to improvement of morals, and to the means of infusing into the mind a love of the Constitution, and a reverence and respect for the Laws (Colquhoun quoted in Bennett 1995: 19).

Conceptualising museums as a moral technology helps to explain the ‘moral panic’ that occurred amongst certain quarters when the Australian Museum displayed the Body Art exhibition in 2000 (Ellison 2003). It also explains visitors’ fears today about museums inciting hatred or violence by engaging with topics such as terrorism, religion, and racism. However, the idea that today museums have a ‘civilising’ influence is one that few people acknowledged in our research. This rare admission is from a staff member of a national American museum:

There is somehow a notion that we all need a national civics lesson and that the Smithsonian Institution is one of the few, very few national institutions that we have administering this lesson...not old civics, but some new version of civics that says we are

a place where you understand American history in such a way that makes you a better citizen (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript USA#d).

While a number of commentators acknowledge that exhibitions can not possibly be 'neutral' and are shaped by the values, attitudes and assumptions of their curators (see for example Cameron 2003, Weil 1988), until now there has been scant attention paid to their role as moral technologies. Is the museum profession in denial that this is at least part of what it does? Is this still a legitimate role for museums?

Regardless of what the profession may think, visitors seem to recognise that it *is* a legitimate role of museums – and some visitors don't seem prepared to give this up yet. They still want museums to have a civilising influence: 'The challenge is putting something that holds up to all our values and truths' (Contested Sites Visitor Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). This notion may also explain why visitors perceive museums to be 'safe' places (Gurian 1995) – perhaps because they offer comfort or reassurance that society still values certain things, or that society's values haven't changed.

... and back again

Despite some common themes in the list of 'hot' topics, it can be difficult to predict what is going to be controversial. Sometimes it is what is taken out of an exhibition; at other times, what goes in, what doesn't go in, or even the timing of an exhibition in relation to a whole range of other events beyond the museum's control. In many respects, what ends up being controversial depends almost entirely on the context: 'What is controversial in one environment may not be controversial in a different environment' (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#d). It's important to remember though, that museums wouldn't be controversial if they didn't matter. These findings definitely tell us that

museums matter.

Writing almost twenty years ago, Hancocks (1987) called for museums to engage with social and cultural problems such as racial and cultural equality, assimilation of refugees, illegal migrants, drug culture, abortion and infanticide, religion, the role of education, population levels, famine, and the nature of human conflict – many of the same issues that are still considered ‘hot’ today. Hancocks claimed that:

Exhibits can act as a tool for social awareness by objectively presenting an overview of contemporary issues. Such exhibits are vital to a community’s life and can show that the museum is relevant for today; it is not buried in the events of the past. Exhibits can inspire the public with interest, awareness, and understanding if they enable visitors to relate the subjects to their lives... [this] could result in the public not only viewing museums as a venue for objective discussions of current events and issues, but also as an important resource for a much greater majority of the community (Hancocks 1987: 190-191).

The question remains though: how best to engage with such topics?

Those museums that seem to be dealing with difficult topics most effectively are those that don’t go out of their way to be controversial, just to deal with pertinent, important issues. As one staff member acknowledged, ‘The aim is not to be controversial, it’s just that the issues are’ (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript UK#b). When engaging with difficult issues, these museums don’t necessarily endeavour to be provocative: ‘I don’t think we should avoid the shocking but our intention is not to do something for shock value (Contested Sites Staff Focus Group Transcript AUS#a). Instead, their aim is ‘to engage with issues that are important and then deal with the difficulties involved’ (Contested Sites Interview Transcript UK#a).

Following is a list of strategies that may help museums to effectively represent controversial issues and sensitive topics in exhibitions while at the same time engaging audience needs and expectations. They are based on the published experiences of several

museum professionals (mainly Boyd 1999, Cooks 1999, McDonald 2003, and Lefcowitz Schwarzer 1994) as well as the collective experiences of dozens of others involved in the *Contested Sites* research, who shared what they had or had not done when controversy arose, and what they would do differently next time. These strategies are already helping museums to successfully engage with contentious subjects today, and should continue to assist museums to do so in the future.

How to engage with controversial issues

The process of designing exhibitions

- Conduct audience analysis to identify who is likely to view the exhibition and/or to have concerns about its content or approach (Boyd 1999)
- Conduct front-end evaluation and/or stakeholder consultation with these audiences, to understand the variety of views and perspectives around the issue, and to build partnerships (Boyd 1999, Cooks 1999)
- Include cultural representatives or other stakeholders on exhibition planning teams (Boyd 1999)
- Consult with stakeholders throughout the exhibition development process, for example, to inform them of how they will be represented (Australian War Memorial 2002)
- Set up an advisory group for stakeholders to play an ongoing role in exhibition development (Boyd 1999). Clarify that their role is advisory rather than one of approval (Australian War Memorial 2002)
- Assess audience responses to the exhibition using front-end evaluation and

formative evaluation (Boyd 1999)

- Identify potentially sensitive issues during exhibition development. At several points during the development process, have senior management review whether the exhibition's topic and approach are appropriate or require a change in direction, balance or emphasis (Boyd 1999)
- Anticipate specific controversies and plan a response strategy to deal with them. For example, identify an official spokesperson, develop a media strategy, brief staff on the exhibition's content, and/or produce information sheets for front-of-house staff to be able to respond to enquiries (Boyd 1999)
- Have a preview period for the exhibition during which remedial evaluation can occur and changes can be made (Cooks 1999)
- Invite stakeholders to participate in remedial evaluation during the preview period (Cooks 1999)

The exhibition itself

- Let visitors know who is speaking in an exhibition: identify the author or authors (Boyd 1999, Cameron 2003)
- Acknowledge that there are a range of competing views (Boyd 1999)
- Identify and explain different sources of evidence such as oral histories and official records (Cameron 2003)
- Include first-person voices in exhibitions to let visitors hear a range of views (Boyd 1999)
- Build 'talk back' areas into exhibitions near controversial displays, where people

can add their own comments and find out what other visitors have said; these include things such as comment cards, comment books, 'letters to the editor', 'vox pop', online newsrooms, interactive computer programs and so forth (Boyd 1999, Cooks 1999, Lefcowitz Schwarzer 1994)

- Have elements of an exhibition that can be updated rapidly and easily to respond to current events, such as websites, computer programs, or even journal or newspaper articles pinned onto a bulletin board (Boyd 1999)
- Discuss controversial issues as part of a broader examination of a topic so that the issue is contextualised. For example, examine racism as one aspect of an immigrant or indigenous experience. Boyd (1999) gives the example of using a deer diorama to explore controversial issues associated with overpopulation of deer in urban and suburban locales.
- Make the process of historical enquiry clear, by identifying new knowledge that has altered previous knowledge (Boyd 1999)
- Make the process of exhibition development clear, by letting visitors know how choices are made as to what is exhibited and how it is displayed (Boyd 1999)
- If appropriate, explain why the museum has certain items in its collections – that is, make explicit the museum's history of collecting (Boyd 1999)

Supporting the exhibition

- Use signs to notify visitors of the content of an exhibition that may be considered confronting or unsuitable for children (Boyd 1999, Cooks 1999)
- Use an official 'rating' scheme to classify an exhibition as unsuitable for children

(McDonald 2003)

- Station staff at the entrance to an exhibition so that parents are advised of its content or children can not enter unaccompanied (Boyd 1999)
- Station staff within the exhibition who can speak with visitors, answer questions, and provide assistance as needed (Cooks 1999)
- Ensure that front-of-house staff are trained in how to handle difficult situations so that they can deal appropriately with a range of visitor responses (Lefcowitz Schwarzer 1994)
- Use public programs, talks, symposia, theatre, and so on to allow a fuller investigation of all of the issues (Boyd 1999)
- Build dialogues into public programs and talks where visitors can ask questions and state their views (Boyd 1999)

Responding to criticism

- Respond according to the agreed, pre-planned strategy rather than reacting in an ad hoc manner (Boyd 1999)
- Emphasise and defend the role of museums as a place to learn about controversial issues (Boyd 1999)
- As a museum community, defend other museums' exhibitions that have been built using sound museological practice, scholarship, consultation, and evaluation (Boyd 1999)

Beyond the exhibition

- Consider the adequacy of current collecting practices in relation to the museum's mandate and mission. If necessary, change collecting practices so that the museum can respond to events and circumstances, build its collection, and thus be better equipped to develop pertinent exhibitions in the future
- Re-position museums as places to learn *from* the past, not just places to learn *about* the past